



An agonized chronicle
of the adventures of
a terminal user

Illustrations by Dave Graves

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CAME THE TIME-SHARER

by D. Neil Loshem

I haven't flown on a 747 yet, and it will be a while before I do. I say that so you will know that I am basically pretty conservative, and that I wouldn't have ordered a time-sharing service if I hadn't thought about it for a while. But there I was, needing an interactive system to back up my consulting work. I didn't know anything about time-sharing, so I sent off the DATAMATION reader service card to half a dozen companies. In due course I got brochures from most of them, which I analyzed as follows.

Co-existent Computers Corp. sounded good, but when I called and admitted to the salesman that I would only need 15 or 20 hours a month, on one terminal, the conversation turned icy. He murmured something about preferring customers with at least five terminals, and how they were about to institute a minimum monthly charge. He promised to call back, but I didn't exactly feel welcome, so I'm not too unhappy not to have heard from him again.

Symbiotic Sharing Systems looked attractive, but when I called them the telephone operator said the phone had been disconnected for non-payment. Hmmm. I had heard things were tough in time-sharing.

Shared Silver Cord looked like a likely candidate. They had a range of

languages, no minimum, and since the salesman's commission was to be paid over a three-month period I figured that they would be in business at least three more months. I put a check mark by that one.

Amniotic Fluidics worried me. I

couldn't shake the impression that they might be trying to do too much for me. I let that one go.

Togetherness Terminals didn't seem bad, but when I called I was told the number had been changed. Warily I dialed the new number, and spent a pleasant few minutes with the operator at Cosmic Conglomerates. She was pretty sure she had heard about the acquisition of Togetherness, but she wasn't able to put her finger on the number. I decided to look for other opportunities.

Combat and Industry Affiliates sounded like an odd name for a time-sharing company, even in Washington, but I figured, "What the hell!" A phone call isn't that big a deal. But the operator wouldn't even talk to me without knowing my clearance level, and since I don't do classified work lately I had to let that one go. I'll never know what the initials mean.

The last name on my list (three companies didn't answer the inquiry) was Universal Umbilicals. Had to pass that one up, too, since they didn't have FORTRAN.

Shared Silver Cord looked like the best bet, so I signed the forms they sent and waited for the new era to dawn.

Dawn arrived a week later, when a delivery company showed up with



a big box. My wife signed for it, since I was out chasing some scraps of consulting income at the time. Three days later a man from Shared Silver arrived, again while I was away (he hadn't called first), to "install" the machine. As I get the picture, this



consisted of taking the terminal out of the box, plugging it in, and making a two-minute call to ssc's computer. He assured my wife that I wouldn't have any trouble.

Ah, but I did! Everything was fine for the first 10 minutes, but then I started getting the "plus sign sickness," as I later came to call it. What this was, was that every so often the typewriter would start spewing out plus signs in the middle of a message. Spewing would continue indefinitely until I turned off the main power switch for the precise 3.7 seconds (plus or minus 0.5 second) that would kill the plus signs but not bounce me from the computer. I didn't think this had been part of the promise of the new era, so I called my contact at Shared Silver, Solomon Basileia, complaining mildly. He promised to send a man out immediately.

The man turned out to be a telephone installer. Not a data set man, mind you, nor a communications man of any sort. I wasn't home, as usual, and I had by now instructed my wife not to attempt to speak for me in such matters. So the telephone man was going on his official instructions, which apparently read "Check out customer complaint." As my wife tells it, he picked up the phone, got a dial tone, said "Must not be the telephone," and left.

Need I tell you that this did not solve the problem? Back to Sol. He

apologized profusely and promised instant action. This turned out to be another telephone man who "balanced the line," whatever the hell that means. This made absolutely no difference. The next call to Sol did get me a terminal man, but again he came without calling first, so I wasn't home. Needless to say, the plus sign sickness was intermittent, and it didn't happen while he was there. He assured my wife that everything was "just fine."

But it wasn't. When I called Sol again I learned that he was on vacation, so I gave the message to the girl who was taking his calls. It was my misfortune to have interrupted her coffee break, so she was in something of a snit. I don't know what she wrote down, but when the serviceman called (fantastic! he called first!) he didn't really have much of an idea what the problem was. I explained it to him, and he said he would be over the next day. I said I would be out then, but since he understood the problem I was sure he would have no trouble.

When I got home the next day my wife was in tears. "Why should he yell at me?" was all I could get out of her. In something of a foul mood I called ssc and asked for "service." Hah! This was at 5:04, so I got an answering service. I thought I had learned never to argue with clerks, but I was too angry to listen to my own advice. I gave the poor girl a sour lecture on how not to service computer equipment.

When I heard from the ssc serviceman the next day, he was obviously having trouble restraining himself. "What did you say you thought was wrong with our equipment?" I didn't much like the tone of his voice or the suggestion that I was imagining things, so I may have shouted. "The damn thing puts out plus signs in the middle of the bloody messages all the time, that's what's wrong with it." He: "Well, all I know is, I spent two hours running all the diagnostics our company and Intergalactic Computers ever devised, and it didn't fail." I: "Beautiful. Now if only I wanted to run diagnostics instead of computing Bessel functions, I'd have a working terminal." He: "Had you ever thought of trying a different terminal company?"

Well, now, by golly I had thought of that, but I was getting stubborn at this point. If computers can send men to the moon and run wars for us,

why couldn't somebody fix a crummy little \$5,000 terminal?

Solomon finally got back from his vacation. I threatened him with the loss of my business, but I somehow don't think \$250 a month impressed him that much. The Better Business Bureau ploy didn't work either, but when I told him I was going to write nasty letters to the editors of DATAMATION AND *Computerworld*, he promised to give it one more look. In fact, he promised that he would himself bring a serviceman over that afternoon, and amazingly enough he did. Would you believe that I was there?

When they came I signed on, got the plus sign sickness going, proved to the serviceman's satisfaction that it was not the computer or the telephone, and left him staring at the thing for a minute. Finally he said, "Oh," started pulling cards, and within 10 minutes had the whole thing fixed. *Permanently.*

Moral: Before you can teach a mule anything, you've got to get his attention—by smashing him over the head with a two-by-four if necessary. If I could have gotten a terminal man



to hear and believe my characterization of the trouble, it could just as well have been fixed two months earlier.

Everything was fine for a couple of months, but then I needed a language Shared Silver didn't have, and decided to get another service. Thought it might be worthwhile to give Togetherness Terminals another look, assuming that by now the Cosmic Conglomerates operator might have found them. Had she ever. And when I got talking with the salesman it turned out that business was really booming. He was quite frank about it: "Now that we're a part of Cosmic, people are willing to believe that we

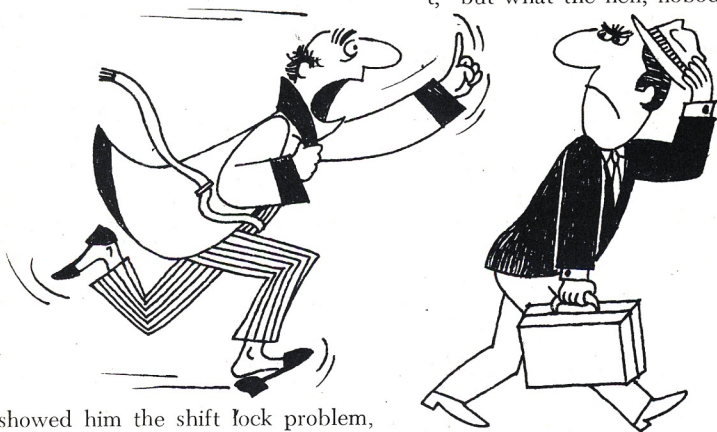
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will be staying in business." That's what he said. I signed up, sadder but wiser, expecting less.

The delivery and installation were much smoother this time, but when I turned on the terminal I discovered two minor problems: whenever I shifted to upper case the keyboard locked in upper case until pounded on, and if I ever hit the "attention" button while the system was typing anywhere in the second half of the line the system would lock up. It could only be unlocked by (you guessed it) turning off the power switch (2.4 seconds, this time, plus or minus 0.3 seconds, and I got bounced half the time anyway).

With a sinking feeling I called my man at Togetherness, Helmut Kilt-schig. He wasn't in, but I gave my message to his secretary, who seemed nice. In fact, I gave her a fairly detailed description (I didn't expect to be in the next day when she assured me the serviceman would be there).

The next day, however, I turned up with a virus, so I was there when my wife told me the man couldn't find any trouble and was about to leave. I roared downstairs to see what was what. Seems he had a totally garbled description of the trouble, and had fixed absolutely nothing. I



showed him the shift lock problem, which he fixed in two minutes.

I then showed him the lockup on an attention in the second half of the line. (An interrupt during the first half of the line, or during the carrier return, didn't cause the trouble.) His first question: "Why would you want to interrupt it? Why not just let it type?" My first impulse was to tell him that for \$147 per month I expected his terminal to work with the reliability of my good old Shared Silver terminal, and it didn't have this trouble. But I wasn't sure I could keep a straight face through that

speech, so I instead tried to explain to him how people use terminals, and how sometimes you can see that you don't want the whole line. He seemed to shake his head at the whims of crazy customers, but maybe that was my imagination. Anyway, he settled down to try to fix the trouble.

Two hours later, having changed two-thirds of the cards, having brought in a new terminal from the truck and gotten the same trouble, and having shot the maintenance budget for the month, he informed me in a barely-controlled rage that, "It must be the computer." I calmly signed onto his computer with my Shared Silver terminal, proved that it *wasn't* the system, and smirked. I really shouldn't have smirked. It wasn't nice, and it wasn't in my own best interests, because he promptly stormed off.

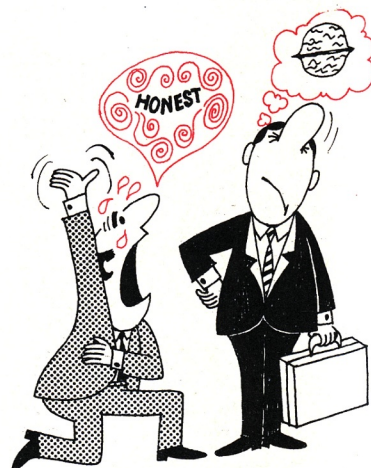
Well! I couldn't allow things like that to happen, so I canceled my Togetherness contract and called up Universal Umbilicals again. Turned out they *did* have FORTRAN; it seems that when I had called earlier I got one of their less senior salesmen, who hadn't heard of FORTRAN at the time. I signed up, and it was very smooth. About twice every page it would send back an "e" where I had typed "t," but what the hell, nobody's per-

fect. (My standards had deteriorated by then.)

All was well, until one day I had to give a lecture and demonstration at the local chapter of the Acronymic Computational Machinations Society. As usual, I put off the preparations until the last minute. As I was putting the terminal in its case, I decided it might be a pretty cool idea to try it out, since I hadn't used that particular system for a couple of weeks. Would I be telling you this except that the computer wouldn't

complete the connection? This is bad news, when it's 5:30 and I'm due at the cocktail hour.

In a panic I called my guru at Universal, Anemone Fleury. She gave me emergency instructions on how to perform mouth-to-mouth re-



suscitation on a sick terminal: switch modems, call a different computer to make sure it isn't the machine, make sure the handset mouthpiece is in the right end of the coupler. (Yes, I did have it in backwards, in my panic, but that wasn't the trouble.) I learned a lot, but the terminal still wouldn't talk to the computer. My Shared Silver terminal wasn't portable, so what was I supposed to do for a talk at ACMs? I didn't have a whole hell of a lot to say anyway, and without a dog act to cover for me I was about to be shown up for a complete charlatan.

But all was not lost. Anemone started talking about how she might be able to find me a substitute terminal, etc., when suddenly she remembered that we hadn't tried the most elementary cure for sick electronic gear. "Now here's what I want you to do," she said. "Pick up the front edge of the terminal about three inches, and drop it." I thought she said to pick it up six inches and drop it three times, so I proceeded to do so. Anemone is screaming, "Enough, already" at the sound of crashing electronics, but when I dialed the head module again, everything was beautiful. I took off for the meeting, had my drinks, skipped dinner, and nobody ever knew that I didn't have anything to say.

Nothing exciting has happened for three whole days now, but I'm not taking bets. If anything interesting develops, I'll let you know. ■